

REVIEW OF THE EUROPEAN MEETINGS OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING POVERTY

DECEMBER 2010

BACKGROUND

This brief document outlines some of the key points from a review of the EU Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty which was carried out among past Irish delegates and their organizations by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland.

Since 2002 Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty and Social Exclusion have been taking place in Brussels as part of the European Social Inclusion Strategy. This is the one formal opportunity for people experiencing the issues to engage directly with decision makers and provide an input to the Strategy, the aim of which is 'to make a decisive impact on poverty by 2010'.

The meetings are hosted by the Member State holding the EU Presidency and are organised and facilitated by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) with support from the European Commission.

The nine meetings which have taken place to date have addressed a range of issues including services such as housing and health, financial inclusion and income and access to quality work as well as looking

more broadly at how poverty and social exclusion impact directly on people's lives.

Each year four delegates with a direct experience of poverty and social exclusion represent Ireland and are supported by a Coordinator. Over the years delegates have been selected to cover a broad range of issues including migration, older people, lone parents, Travellers, disabilities, homelessness, unemployment and marginalised communities.

In 2010 the 9th Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty (PEP) was hosted by the Spanish Presidency and as part of this meeting a review process took place which brought together three main parts.

Firstly, at the 9th Meeting the initial findings of a research on the impact of EU Meetings was presented and discussed. Secondly, there was an exchange between the delegates and the members of the European Parliament. Thirdly the delegations of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion discussed the research and presented their 10 year Action Plans for fighting against poverty (A summary

of these is presented in the Appendix). The delegates did this by reflecting on the proposals which came from previous meetings. It was hoped that the ideas that emerged from that exercise would be taken up in the final declaration from the 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

For more info see: www.eapn.ie/eapn/participation/people-experiencing-poverty



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Below are the key issues which have arisen from the review of the EU Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty. The issues raised also reflect some of the wider experiences from the participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their organisations in forums which are designed to influence decision making in Ireland and in Europe.

The European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in 2010 provided an opportunity to review the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty (PEP) from the viewpoint of past delegates and the organisations and groups they are linked with. This review took place at an EU level, and at a national level EAPN Ireland engaged in their own review with past delegates and their member Organisations. It looked at how on an ongoing basis EAPN Ireland can strengthen the preparation and follow-up process of the PEP meetings. The preparation process is crucial, if delegates are well prepared they are better able to participate at the meetings.

The Irish delegates felt that it was important to disseminate the findings from the review to those

involved in decision making in order to hopefully improve how consultation and participation in decision making takes place in future.

KEY POINTS RAISED IN THE REVIEW

1. POSITIVES

In general delegates very much valued the opportunity to participate in the Meetings, to have their say and represent their issues. They also appreciated the opportunity to meet with people from other countries and to share experiences. They felt that this led to better decisions being made and an improved life for people who live in poverty and social exclusion.

Most individuals felt that the experience was positive for them personally and that they gained from the experience. One stated that 'On a personal level it was a great experience to get to speak to legislators and policy makers. Good for these to meet directly with people experiencing the issues'.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: The biggest impact of the meetings was personal development of people experiencing poverty and participation in the meeting was very good. In terms of personal development delegates felt more emotionally supported – they developed more confidence in themselves and gained confidence in engaging with policy makers/politicians. Delegates felt more empowered.

COLLECTIVE FEELINGS: Delegates developed a sense of solidarity and a cross national - European -identity developed. They felt more confident about offering to help each other on similar issues. Partnerships developed and networks were formed.

SHARED KNOWLEDGE: Through understanding shared realities, as well as the diversity in situations and in poverty issues - delegates looked at other peoples' solutions and it helped them look at problems in a broader perspective.

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Delegates who participated at PEP meetings brought a European dimension to their networks/organisations and helped their Org./NGO to influence policy.

National meetings with policy makers are a very important part of the preparation and follow-up processes. The meetings made the realities more tangible for policy makers and were a source of information.

2. NEGATIVES

Delegates were generally frustrated and in agreement that there is little sign of the meetings having an impact or that they brought about change. In fact many believed that the situation had worsened, especially in the past two years. This also reflects their involvement in other areas at national and local level where they have engaged with policy makers.

One person, who is a migrant, did however highlight an improvement in her situation and those in a similar situation to her though the introduction of a Code of Practice in Ireland for those working in

the private home. This gives people the belief that positive changes are possible.

Policy makers need to engage more actively in the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty. This includes representatives from national Governments, the European Commission and Members of the European Parliament. However, the participation of two Irish MEPs in this year's meeting was greatly appreciated, with only 15 MEPs participating overall.

The Meetings had less impact in terms of influencing policies and delegates felt there was a lack of accountability and would like to see this addressed. No-one seemed to be held accountable for the lack of progress or for any negative changes which worsen the situation for people. The lack of accountability is across the system.

The current economic situation leading to cuts in social welfare payments, services, etc leaves people feeling very fearful that their situation may be even worse in the future.

The impact on civil society actors/policy makers/ govt departments/institutions and public debate could be improved and greater emphasis put on engaging with the Media to ensure that the issues are highlighted and that the realities for people who live in poverty are addressed.

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3. WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

The Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty need to continue past 2010 but the issues raised above need to be addressed.

Delegates need to be able to see how their contributions in the Meetings have been addressed and if they have or have not had any impact on policy decisions that have been taken.

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Accountability is a big issue for delegates - there needs to be greater accountability across the system if decisions that are agreed are not acted upon or for those who have made decisions or acted in a way which has worsened the situation for people.

Participation needs to be meaningful where people experiencing poverty have their views listened to and taken seriously.

Lack of continuity with policy makers as they keep changing and the representatives sent by government department keep changing and they do not engage in a meaningful way with the process. Where people have participated in decision making activity under specific government departments, a senior civil servant from the department needs to be responsible for follow-up and feedback to those who participated.

European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty must lose the jargon and use language that is understood by all.

Policy makers, political representatives and representatives of others who engage in these participation processes must work to ensure that knowledge and expertise coming from the lived realities of people who face poverty and social exclusion becomes a source to inform policy making implementation and follow-up accountability a key.

4. GENERAL MESSAGE

The delegates to the 9th EU meeting demonstrated that they want a more social Europe. There was a strong demand from the delegates that the actions taken by the EU to follow up the recommendations from the European meetings be made more visible. They also stressed that it was hard to see that the fight against poverty and social exclusion was a major priority for the EU.

The delegates also stressed that in many cases the impact and responses to the economic crisis are putting unbearable pressure on people who are already suffering from the burden of poverty and social exclusion. The knowledge and experience of people who live in poverty must not be lost as this is the most powerful way for politicians and policy makers to inform themselves of the realities for people.

APPENDIX

KEY PRIORITIES FOR DELEGATES AT THE 9TH MEETING FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS

- The right to an adequate and appropriate minimum income for a dignified life should be enforced by all national governments.
- Stop the cutting of essential benefits and services by promoting redistribution, social investments and access to quality jobs into the future for all.
- The legacy of EU 2010 should be that the proposed Poverty Platform involves all relevant stakeholders, with people experiencing poverty at the heart of it.
- Guarantee access without barriers and obstacles to fundamental rights, such as housing, employment, minimum income, education, health and culture.
- Guarantee the effective participation of the people concerned in making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of public policies. This involves having more information so that people are able to join in the thinking, the talking, the
- developing and the decision-making in policies.
- The approach to poverty must not be fragmented. It is necessary to fight poverty and social exclusion through a global approach.
- Government is responsible for not cutting the social budgets and for finding instruments to provide a life in dignity for its citizens
- Decision-makers should be accountable for all their decisions. It is important that all decisions are based on research, that they are the result of a participatory process, and that progress towards the objective is closely monitored, on the basis of commonly agreed indicators.
- Children, as children, and as tomorrow's adults, need to be a key focus of social policies. If you meet the needs of children, you meet the needs of all human beings. Child well-being and social inclusion of children need to be considered in its multidimensionality.
- Housing: Every European Citizen should have the right to live in an affordable and good quality house in a socially safe environment with access to affordable utilities (water, gas, electricity).
- Some of the other priorities for the fight against poverty included:
 - o To take the family into account
 - o To support disabled people
 - o Migration
 - o Equality and rights for all
 - o Build a Europe for all
 - o Don't let people in poverty pay for the crisis
 - o End inequality (in practice)
 - o Put people at the centre!! People first!!
 - o No more blah blah blah
 - o Poverty is as important as Global warming.

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